

INTERVIEWEE: PHILLIP BOYD

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

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TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

PY: Interview with Phillip Boyd for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project by Patricia Young on January 24, 1980, at ten o'clock in the morning at his home in Marrakesh on Portola in Palm Desert.

Morning discussing how Mr. Boyd, why Mr. Boyd moved to the Palm Desert area.

PB: Well, my first actual experience in coming down here with a feeling that I belonged here and was interested in acquiring property occurred in the late 1930s. It came about this way: there was a young man who had been an instructor in a boys' private school in Arizona. His name was William Mason, who decided to come to this part of the desert, Palm Desert area, to start a new private school and he was financed by the parents of one of his students that he'd had in Arizona. He came



over and looked around and acquired about two hundred and seventy acres which was located on what we now call Portola about a mile, three-quarters of a mile, south of the highway. The property was particularly attractive to him because it had a butte on it, a hillside, which would reach out and give a marvelous view in all directions. The unusual part of it is his financial backers who were a man and wife of a Count and Mrs. Countess, I guess, she would be, who came out from Pittsburgh. They acquired the land and then started to drill a well because they realized they had to have water. And in their first effort, they were unsuccessful. It was what you called a dry hole. Thereupon the Count went to France and said he wouldn't have anything more to do with it. And it couldn't be a proper location for his school if it didn't have water. So discouraged, Bill Mason decided that he'd go into the Palm Springs area and find employment and not be able to start his private school because the financing wasn't there. And I knew him personally. He came to me and said how can I sell this property? While having some knowledge of land values and having driven back and forth a good deal,



on the way to Indio, for instance, to meet the train, the Southern Pacific train, when people frequently arrived in the desert, I had driven by and thought it was worth acquiring, and purchased it for about the same price that he had acquired it for, taking the amount of it without any loss. And I believe that date was about 1937. And for the next few years Mrs. Boyd and I came down regularly just to enjoy the sight. We'd go up on the butte. We built a barbecue arrangement. An architect from Palm Springs by the name of Albert Fray designed it with large cement blocks around. A very pleasant place to sit, particularly in the evening. In those days you couldn't see any light after dark. There were not buildings, no homes, they were really out in the desert, and it was a very pleasant, relaxing opportunity. And I learned to love this portion of it with that experience. And we entertained frequently there. We'd give late afternoon picnics and sit up there around and let the stars come out or the moon come up. Sometimes there would be a little rodent scurrying around that we would feed and so on. And the desert seemed to us to be extremely attractive. The next experience we had, it was rather abrupt and wasn't anticipated, we had planned



to come down to entertain a bride and groom on top of the butte, and perhaps twelve or fifteen people were invited. We went early to start the fire and have the food ready. And as we approached, and this was several years later. I believe I would estimate this as forty-two or forty-three. As we approached the little dirt road that went into the picnic site, we were stopped by a sergeant in uniform and said you can't come in here. Well, I said, this is my ranch. Why do you stop me? And the answer was the army had taken over the property. And this was, as you have learned, for probably Patton's group who were training men and were seeking a site then for various maneuvers, particularly to hide equipment from aerial surveys and later on for repair of military equipment. I was pretty annoyed because I said, well, nobody has told me that they're taking my property. And this sergeant said, well, I don't know anything about it. I was told not to let anybody on the property. This was followed by my statement that we have guests coming. I'm going over on the butte. Who is your superior officer. And he said Major so and so will be here in about a half hour. Well, I said, you tell him to come see me. I'm over on the butte.



We're preparing for guests and please let them come in. Well, about a half an hour later along came a jeep with a major in it, I believe he was. And he came up, strutted up the hill where we were and was rather severe. And I explained to him. He said, wasn't this leased from you, this land? I said I hadn't talked to anybody about it, any military people or anything. Well, he said, there's some mistake then. I said, won't you sit down with us? He was lonely and away from home, and he spent the evening with us. (laughter) When the guests arrived and had a nice picnic. And he said, we'll send somebody to you in the next few days to straighten this out. Well, that was the beginning of a lease. They occupied the full area that we owned for the next two years at least. I think there was as many as fifteen hundred or two thousand soldiers there in tents and various structures. And they drilled wells all over and found plenty of water. And then I thought I was going to have a lot of water supply when they left, but they also took the casing out because there was a shortage of steel and it was needed to be taken over. They were preparing to go over to Africa. They were in the African campaign with Rommel. And so



they all left and I didn't get it back until about forty-four or forty-five, along in there. And in that period I would look in occasionally, but really not feel very welcome. And now you asked me how we happened to come down here. That was the first experience I had and had learned to like it. And with that interruption wanted to come back as soon as I could. Now what other questions do you want? That was asking why I first came down here.

PY: Actually about the well. Did you have to drill another well?

PB: Yes. I drilled subsequently three wells and found plenty of water.

PY: How deep were the wells?

PB: Well, as I recall the first well was about three hundred feet deep, but later I went a little deeper. There was first a windmill well. The windmill is still there. And then I went further out and built a much larger well about out there where Gerald Ford and the Firestones lived, which was the corner of . . . wait a minute, wait a minute. I'm in the wrong area. Excuse me. I also drilled wells up at what is now Rancho Mirage and Thunderbird. I owned that ranch up there,



too. No, this other well was drilled a little further down and was supplying water for the subdivision I had and the water was pumped up into a big twenty thousand gallon tank on the top of the butte for pressure. I really had three wells, one under the windmill, one down by the barn, and another one down below near what might be called Fairway Drive down close to Fairway Drive. We found plenty of water. The water gradually has come down since then, but we had large wells, the windmill well not as large as the other two. Later we sold our water supply to the Water District because we didn't want to be in the business of continuing to serve water. I started a subdivision, three small subdivisions down at the north part of the property along Deep Canyon, ranch subdivision. You go along there, oh, prospect your trail, and these streets were all part of a subdivision. We probably had fifty, sixty houses in there.

PY: Was that after Palm Desert community started?

PB: It was the same time when the Palm Desert was building north of Fairway Drive, along in there. It was about the same time they were starting the Shadow Mountain Club. As a matter of fact, I was one of the first directors



of Shadow Mountain Club with Cliff Henderson and the others. I was interested in being sure that they had a nice resort area nearby for people who were buying property from me. My subdivision was a limited area, I think maybe forty, fifty acres. The rest of it I kept in undeveloped acreage. Now what do you want to know?

PY: You eventually built the ranch houses

PB: Well, that was kind of an interesting thing. It was not one that we built. It was one we remodeled and moved onto the property. And I can give you some dates on that because I think it's rather an unusual experience. I brought you through the war when the military gave it back to me. And during that period up in Palm Springs the General Hospital had been operating in place of the El Mirador Hotel. And they had a lot of temporary buildings, barracks, from it. At the end of the war, when it once more became a hotel, they sold those barracks buildings and we bought one, twenty feet wide and sixty feet long. It was one where Italian prisoners of war lived, and they were providing services there at . . . and that is the ranch house. And Mrs. Boyd did a very clever job of dividing it in half. And in one side



we had a caretaker and the other side we had room for our family with two bedrooms and a kitchenette and a bath and living room. And that, as I recall, we brought that down about 1947, along in there, after the war, you see. And then we added two more buildings about two or three years later that came from Deep Well Ranch. Our guest house was the Deep Well Ranch tack room where the cowboys lived down near the stables where we had twenty-five head of horses. When we sold there, we took that building and carted it here and made it a guest house. Since then that building has moved up to Deep Canyon. It's where the resident scientist lives. But then we moved up from Deep Well Ranch, also the so called box stall building, which is still over there. The box stall building is there, and the barracks building is there, but the guest house is moved away. Those, the little memorandum I made here, the barracks building was brought up about forty-seven and the other two buildings for Deep Well Ranch came in about 1950. And we used the box stalls for kind of a series of small bedrooms for scientists who were working up in the canyon and had to have a place to live. At that time we hadn't provided anything up there. So



we had two or three scientists from time to time living there. We had a little kitchenette and several bedrooms. The box stall was a small area, so the bedrooms were small. They were big enough for one or two people to live. Those two buildings are there. I think they're soon going to be taken out by the vintage people who purchased the property. But the age of those buildings and the source of them we didn't build any. We moved all on and remodeled. And that we called the Deep Canyon Ranch, and we were in possession of that and using it frequently from about that period, 1947 to 1950. Then we sold it in 1972. We sold it to another, to two other developers who sold the vintage. The names of those men was Williams and Bohanan. They were two men from up in the Bay Area. And one of them down at Palo Alto. However, we were anxious to keep the same sort of a view, so when we sold our ranch house and the property there, we came over here. We had exactly the same south view toward the Santa Rosa Mountains which we had enjoyed for so many years there. Now the life that we had there was not a continuous experience. We had weekend use and we had also a home in Riverside for awhile. And that came about because after the war,



well, during the war as a matter of fact, failing to get into military service, I decided to run for the State Legislature and was an assemblyman for four years representing this area, all of Riverside County, having had some political experience before that. And my first use of that barracks. The picnics were in the evening, and in the daytime I would come down here in about 1938, thirty-nine, forty, and I was mayor of Palm Springs, to prepare the material that I used for various discussions or public addresses or meeting some of the problems when I wanted to get away. I had a little card table down there and typewriter. I didn't have any tape recording back in those days. But I learned to love it that way, but I had the political associations that go with persons that were involved away from here some. So, although I've always had a place to live on the desert, there were periods when I was away a good many months. During the period I was in the State Legislature, I was in Sacramento a great deal and my family were in Riverside. We'd had a home in Palm Springs for many years which we sold and began to move down here steadily after that. Now the early days here, which I think belong in your history here, I've described



the attraction that the desert was for me. Then I will give you a comment. By the way, can we stop for a minute?

The area here, of course, when we're talking about 1950, we're talking about thirty years ago and it was a very small community and no incorporation. But people, some of whom are still are still living there, were involved in the development. And also interested in protecting the area to make it a community of attractive land use planning. Now remember I had a number of years' experience in Palm Springs with land use planning, working with planning commissions, professional planners. So I got involved pretty quickly down here, and I think my first association was with the Indian Wells-El Dorado Property Owners Association of which I was a board member. And for several years we worked with the county to try to limit the use of land where there might be residential or there might be business development, the size of lots and things of that sort. And the design for streets and so on. That was a very interesting group that led up to the incorporation of Indian Wells. Pete Peterson was the first mayor there. And then I



was no longer involved, but I was up until the time of the incorporation. You realize that the ranch was really in Indian Wells. The division between Palm Desert and Indian Wells is Portola at that portion of the street. But when I moved over here, I became a Palm Desert resident. And then I was involved on the pre-incorporation committee here, working under Bob Hubbard who was the chairman of the committee. He spent a lot of time explaining to the citizens and voters why it would be to their advantage, that they shouldn't be afraid of the taxes and where that income would come from. And again my experience with both the Indian Wells and Palm Springs gave me contacts with agencies that could be helpful so that we knew how to look for city managers and things like that to get this city started. So I was involved in the incorporation of three towns in a way, Palm Springs, Indian Wells and Palm Desert, to a limited degree, associated with others and didn't assume any official position except in Palm Springs. But since that time my attention turned to the things that I think you're more interested in and why I was anxious to see the desert preserved through two developments, one which we now know as the



Living Desert and the other as the Deep Canyon Research Center which is a part of the University of California System of Natural Land and Water Reserve. My interest first was attracted to the area that was owned by the Coachella Valley Water District just south of the

which was the boundary line of my ranch.

And I was frequently over there. And during the wartime when the military was occupying our property, they were over there abusing that land a great deal. In other words, when I went over, I could see where their jeeps were running around. They were shooting coyotes or they were dumping things that should have been picked up. And following that there was a good deal of public use and abuse. People would go over there and dump trash. They would go over and cut smoketrees out for decoration purposes. They were shooting quail. And I suddenly realized, being as close to it as I was and familiar with it, that that was going to be a destroyed beautiful natural area. And I shared that feeling with others. One was Randall Henderson whom I feel should be mentioned as a man who had come here to be the first editor of the Desert Magazine, a the desert enthusiast and a desert philosopher, a person



with extreme interest in character and confidence. He and I used to talk a great deal about this. And I said, well, if we can acquire that over there, let's do it and save it. And we went to the Water District and they said there's no way that we can sell it or rent it to you because we can't do it to an individual. I went to their attorney whom I happened to know personally by the name of Earl Redwine and he said, well, let's think about it a little bit. I think if a nonprofit corporation was available that the Water District could enter into a long-term lease if the Water District wants to. Well, I talked it over at a board meeting and they wanted to because as long as they owned it, it was sort of a semi-public place and they couldn't keep people out where if the lease were finished, were consummated, we then could put fencing in and control the abuse and make it more interesting as a natural area. So we entered into a long-term lease with the Palm Springs Desert Museum, which I was one of the early directors and I still am a trustee there. They were interested only to let their name be used if we would raise the money down here. I think the lease was 1952 and it's been



extended; it runs way out to 2040 or something like that now, its stilleries. And the next move we had was to fence it, and then we went over and put in some nature trails. We built an oasis. We did quite a few things for a few years. We called it the Wildlife Sanctuary. The name Living Desert was not then thought of as a proper name. Even then where it was open at a gate people walked by a sign which plead, please don't disturb the plants, please don't do anything to upset the natural conditions you find here. We still had people going over there and ripping up signs and causing trouble because we had no custodian. We had no one there to guard the place. So we knew we had to reach the point where we had to have some buildings there and some people living there and then some control that could be enforced. And that led up to the period 1970, and that's when we formed the Living Desert Association first. And I think it's interesting to know that the name Living Desert came indirectly with the approval of the Walt Disney Studios. I like the Living Desert as a motion picture, was one of his first nature pictures that Walt Disney made. And you realize he lived up at Smoketree a great deal



of time. And so he knew the desert pretty well. And I wrote them a letter and said I'd like to know whether the name Living Desert was theirs by copyright or control or whether they meant us to use it because we were so fascinated by that movie we knew what we had was similar to what they were promoting through that picture. And they sent an attorney down from their legal department who spent two hours walking all over this, and he became enthusiastic. And he went back and wrote a letter. And after their board meeting, the Walt Disney group, and said you may use it and we'd be glad to help you sometime. And so then we were the Living Desert after that, Living Desert Reserve. And to jump ahead a little, at that time we were an association that was sponsoring the museum. Now we're an independent nonprofit corporation. It's still the Living Desert Reserve. But the next thing that I think is of interest and the two tie in together is the fact that with the public's use of the nature trails over there, it couldn't be used for research successfully by scientists because anything they would do in a measuring device or any area where they wanted to exclude the public so that they could observe growth



or animal life wasn't secure. I want to say that a couple of things happened about that time, and I'm trying to think of the date on this. This date on this picture, I just looked this morning, is 1958, and what I'm showing you is a picture that was made in the nature trail area of then the Wildlife Sanctuary. And these are rather distinguished people, at least three of them are. This is Randall Henderson making a record of the identification of plants made by Dr. Edmond Yeager who was quite a distinguished scientist. This was then Chancellor, although I think he was called                    then, Herman Speeth, of the University of California, Riverside. He had in his hand a net, and he's an entomologist; he was catching insects. You see what insects are there. Edmond Yeager identified about eighty different plants in the course of two hours. Randall Henderson wrote them down. I was standing there, hearing something that they were keeping <sup>some</sup> records and we were together. That opened up the realization that we had something over there which was remarkable, partly because of the regular flow of water through there. You see, it stimulated plant life and, of course, the plant life stimulates animal life,



too, birds and rodents and so the next thing we knew, with the university having become interested, they encouraged two people to come down here with a mobile laboratory. Those two people were Lloyd Tevis, a scientist now living in Rancho Mirage, and a Dr. Fritz Went who was at Cal Tech. And they secured a mobile laboratory as a gift from Pearl McCallum McManus, is quite a well-known name in Palm Springs. And they started to set up for study over in this area. But then they were disturbed by the public all the time. And they came to me and said, isn't there someplace here where we could get into a part of the desert nearby without any disturbance, where it can be used entirely for scientific research. Well, I must go back and say in 1937 or thirty-eight I had purchased three sections of land up in Deep Canyon and we used to ride up there on horseback. Now this picture was taken in 1937, thirty-eight, and it is a group of people on horseback, I've identified them, going up into Deep Canyon. That's how I learned to like that area and want to see it preserved, too. So at the time when they said, well, isn't there someplace we can go, I said, let's go look at the land that we have



up in the canyon. And they were fascinated with it.

There was many changes. The elevation is about a thousand feet in there. And they had the whole Santa Rosa Range behind them.

PY: May I just ask a question? Who had you purchased this property from?

PB: Well, from the Southern Pacific Railroad.

PY: As well as this property down here?

PB: No.

PY: No, I mean that man that you, Mr. Mason, purchased after the Southern Pacific?

PB: No, no. Well, Mr. Mason had, if the Southern Pacific ever owned this, and I'm not sure they did, it would have been quite a long time ago. No, I think Mr. Mason purchased it from another individual who had invested in it. But my purchase was from Mason and the purchase up there was Southern Pacific land. As you know, Southern Pacific had a large, every other section through here as the Indians did in another area. But the, I'm trying to give you the origin of the interest and the dates of development, when the Went and Tevis Mobile Laboratory was established up there, with my permission for awhile. The university



became interested, and Mr. Tevis then changed his employment to the University of California, was one of the first directors there with several other distinguished scientists. And I think the record will show that it was somewhere about 1960 when I gave those sections to the University of California with the limitation that it be used for research. And we put a fencing all the way across with a control gate, and no one goes in there without being with someone from the university or having permission or being a person who is involved in research. And since that time, that's been a period of twenty years, there's been a great deal of successful research. There's been publications and so on. Now the history of that area is pretty well described in this book. You've probably seen this.

END OF INTERVIEW